

***Shakarim: The Life of a Kazakh Poet.*** By Yerlan Sydykov. London: Aitmatov Academy, 2015, 174 pp.

This book looks at the entire life of a Kazakh poet, philosopher and educator, Shakarim, between his birth in 1858 and death in 1931. However, this is more than a biography of a man; it is a short history of a nation. Through every description of a family gathering, marriage, education, social engagement of an extraordinary, yet singular man, the author brings out the story of a people at a time of great upheaval and change.

Yerlan Sydykov has been president of the Gumilyov Eurasian National University for the last four years. He is a fellow of the Kazakhstan Academy of Sciences, and professor of History. Sydykov has worked in the Kazakh higher education system since 1978. As a teacher and researcher he has close ties with three of the major universities of Kazakhstan, the Semipalatinsk Technological Institute of the Meat & Milk Industry, where he is now Vice President, the Semipalatinsk Institute of Education, and the Shakarim State University of Semipalatinsk.

The book is a result of important academic research, yet it is written in a highly accessible and engaging style, offering its reader both historical information and the sense of the lived experience of the time.

From the very first pages it is an indispensable resource, providing a chronology, a list of historical figures with short biographies, as well as a glossary of both Kazakh and Russian terms, which are used in the text. To add to its numerous achievements the book will be now available in a wonderful English translation.

Shakarim's life is described in a style that befits the great poet himself – with a strong sense of open-minded acceptance of various viewpoints and a very balanced take on history.

This is the first comprehensive biography of the poet and it places Shakarim as well as his ancestral lands in the epicentre of the Kazakh national consciousness.

History is linked with both people and land – which for Shakarim as well as the author of the book form an umbilical cord for Kazakh soul. The soul historically had found its expression through the oral literary tradition. Shakarim is shown as one of the central figures in the transformation of this tradition into written record. Coming from an intellectual family, the poet was born at a time when traditional views on religion and education coexisted with the Tsarist officialdom and management of society.

Through the pages of the book we learn about the linguistic changes that

were taking place, and the growing status of the enlightened nobility. Moving on through the prism of Shakarim's extended family we learn of the gender relations and status of women in the steppe at the time. This, like other aspects of Kazakh every-day life, is shown by the author to be a far more complex issue than may be otherwise perceived.

Class difference is also explored, together with how children were raised. One could pick up positive parental advice from the book, where Shakarim's early childhood is filled with games and perception of study as entertainment rather than a chore.

Through Shakarim's reading list as an adolescent we learn of Kazakh epic poetry. Through his encounters we learn of the trade with Russians and the meeting of tradition and knowledge. Tsarist societal structures are explored through Shakarim's own involvements in the governing bodies. His connection to Abai, the greatest Kazakh literary figure and his uncle, is explored in depth.

Changing lifestyle and lack of preconceptions are made visible through Shakarim's interest in poetry both Russian and Eastern, and his enthusiasm about music from different parts of the world.

We further read of the Kazakh-Russian connections, as the poet becomes the translator and also a representative of the government in the steppe. We also read of his involvement with Russian exiles and intellectuals in the region.

Shakarim is part of the Kazakh identity today, however he started the conscious building of this identity with his writings on the genealogy and history of Kazakhs.

His interest in Sufism leads to him translating and transforming traditional poetry to contain both the religious outlook and the familiar forms of the steppe. This unity, acceptable to the poet, later exposes the conflict between Islam and Tengrism in a family matter.

He goes on to write one of the first poems in Kazakh written literature on the subject of national history *Kalkaman* and *Mamyra*. The story further considers the traditional customs and rules of the nomads. It seems the great poet and thinker is revealing the underlying tensions between tradition and religion. Another tension - between Tsarist and later revolutionary Soviet rule and national autonomy also seems to be traced through Shakarim's life and writings. From him learning the Russian language, and his correspondence with Tolstoy, to him becoming the symbol of the Kazakh cause, his own life was a complex weaving of thought

and contemplation.

The first part of the book centres on Shakarim's creative and cultural work, itself written in a very melodic and flowing language. The second part is a much darker and denser examination of the Revolution and the genocide. Here Shakarim's life is seen as the backdrop to momentous events that were unfolding not just in Kazakhstan, but also in Russia, showing the links between the Kazakh uprising of 1916, the First World War, the Russian Revolutions and the Civil War. Here the first genocide of the nation becomes part of world history. Shakarim is shown as a reluctant revolutionary, the man who believed in change, but not in violence.

The first attacks on knowledge come fast, with closures of newspapers following the revolution. Shakarim witnesses the abuses of power on all sides. The author cites the statistics of killings carried out by both the Reds and the Whites. Written in the true spirit of Shakarim the chapters on upheaval take no sides in this book.

However, as the history gets darker, the book becomes a bleeding record of the time. Confiscations, collapse of nomadism, indiscriminate killings, uprisings, violence, secret police, and most stunningly, rumours become the norm. These are rumours that condemn Shakarim to the fate that is so symbolic of his own time. Killed by a bullet, named enemy of the people, he was confined to near extermination not only as a man, but also as a memory. His family members disappearing one by one, his literary legacy prohibited. His family was victim to the second genocide that author talks about, that of the 1930s. Persecutions and the famine that took away half of all Kazakh population.

However, the book leaves us on a positive note, Shakarim's name is once again spoken aloud and his works are published. The author asks in the preface: "why is it that Kazakhs should want to read the work of this one hundred year old poet?" (p. 20) We could wholeheartedly ask today: whether Kazakh or not - if you are interested in Kazakh history, culture and soul - how can you not read Shakarim's work? His life and his writings are the story of this nation.

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